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Tiny District Finds Bonanza of Pupils and Funds Online

By SAM DILLON

BRANSON, Colo. - With no grocery store or gas station and a population of 77 souls, this desert village seems an unlikely home for a fast-growing public school that has enrolled students from all across Colorado.

There are just 65 students attending Branson's lone brick and mortar school, but there are an additional 1,000 enrolled in its online affiliate. And with the state paying school districts \$5,600 per pupil, Branson Online has been a bonanza. Founded in 2001, it has received \$15 million so far.

The school district has used the money to hire everyone in town who wants a job, including the mayor, who teaches 15 students via e-mail. It has broadcast radio commercials statewide to recruit students and built a new headquarters here. But if the school has been financially successful, its academic record is mixed, and the authorities have put the school on academic probation.

Branson Online is one of at least 100 Internet-based public schools that local educators have founded nationwide in recent years, often in partnership with private companies, and many online schools share Branson's strengths and weaknesses, experts said.

The federal Department of Education does not keep track of enrollment numbers, but in a January report the department noted the emergence of scores of online public schools and said they were experiencing "explosive growth."

"Cyberschools are the 800-pound gorilla of the choice movement, although vouchers and charter schools get a lot more attention," said William Moloney, education commissioner in Colorado, where state financing for online schools has increased almost 20-fold in five years - to \$20.2 million for 3,585 students today from \$1.1 million for 166 full-time students in 2000.

"That's a mighty steep curve, and nothing says it won't keep growing," Mr. Moloney said.

Like other online schools across the nation, Branson has proved to be an attractive alternative for parents who wish to supervise their children's education at home, and for students who hold jobs or are disabled.

But the schools are beginning to draw scrutiny. As in Colorado, online schools in other states have also shown mediocre academic performance. In Florida, for instance, students at taxpayer-financed online schools run by corporate managers made slower progress last year on standardized math tests than did students at most traditional schools.

A report on online schools nationwide, issued last May by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, a nonprofit group based in Illinois, concluded that states should monitor the academic and other performance of Internet schools more closely. "The rapid expansion of K-12 online learning threatens to outpace the development of appropriate state-level policies," it said.

Several Colorado superintendents have criticized Branson Online for enrolling their students, thereby taking money away from their districts. Others just say the quality of the education is questionable. Glenn Davis, superintendent of the Huerfano School District in Walsenburg, said that although he had lost a few students to Branson his main concern was that online schools had become magnets for low-achieving students.

"It's not a good plan for 90 percent of kids," Mr. Davis said. "They don't have the discipline or the parental support to make it work, and in many cases it's become a way to drop out legally before you're 16."

Online schools in Colorado are subject to the same regulations as the sponsoring districts, which need no special permission to found them.

State Senator Sue Windels, a Democrat who heads the Education Committee, introduced a bill last month that would tighten the monitoring of online schools. Even so, Troy Mayfield, Branson's superintendent, predicted that Branson Online would continue to grow.

"This can get as big as our imagination will let it," Mr. Mayfield said.

Only five years ago, Branson, which sits on an arid flatland of scrub oak and yucca 30 miles east of Interstate 25 near the New Mexico border, was dying. The Roman Catholic church had closed for lack of a priest, and the only nonranch employment was at the one-woman Post Office; the county garage, where three men kept the snowplows running; and the school, whose kindergarten to 12th grade enrollment had shrunk to 41 students.

But the superintendent at that time, J. Alan Aufderheide, a computer enthusiast and a bit of a visionary, had acquired an Internet server with federal money and used it to make computerized texts in calculus and other courses available to Branson students and teachers online. The experiment was so popular that Dr. Aufderheide proposed that the district build a K-12 curriculum and open a virtual school, assigning the town's eight teachers to work with students via telephone and e-mail.

The school board agreed, and Branson Online advertised for students on radio stations in Denver and other cities, and in newspapers and ranch magazines. One enticement was the offer of a free computer and high-speed Internet hookup for each student, which Branson finances with the state per-pupil allotment.

The school's curriculum was an online elaboration of courses taught in Branson's existing school. Many courses were based on educational software that Dr. Aufderheide purchased commercially. For middle school social studies, for instance, Branson Online uses Prentice Hall course software, "The American Nation," and some high school math courses are based on software purchased from Boxer Learning Inc., based in Virginia. Dr. Aufderheide said he expected the online school, www.bransonschoolonline.com, to attract perhaps 25 students its first year. But 110 students signed up in the fall of 2001; 739 in the fall of 2002; and 1,004 in the fall of 2003. Colorado education law allows students to enroll at almost any Colorado public school, not just at those in their home district. To keep up with the exploding enrollment, the school hired some 70 new teachers, most working from their homes. Today most but not all of the teachers are certified.

Branson's students have included a girl training as an Olympic skater, a boy competing with his quarter horse in out-of-state livestock shows, and a teenager whose missionary parents were moving to Haiti.

Rhonda Allenback, who lives in Pueblo, Colo., 100 miles northwest of Branson, said she enrolled three of her four children in Branson Online because she wanted to help two of them pursue dance training while tending to the laser engraving business she runs from her garage.

"The Internet school fit the bill so that they could do school and I could do my business," Ms. Allenback said.

Branson Online has also attracted bedridden students as well as those who have gotten in trouble or failed in traditional schools.

"Most of my kids, nobody else wants them or they're sick," said Beverly Sheldon, a veteran teacher who has been Branson's mayor since 1997 and a part-time instructor since the online school's founding. Her students have included a 14-year-old girl serving probation for crimes, and, this year, two pregnant teenagers, she said.

Ms. Sheldon communicates frequently via e-mail and telephone with her students, she said, sending messages like, "Haven't heard from you, where's your homework?" or, when they send work in, "Great, you filled my mailbox - love it."

Self-motivated students prosper, but others flounder, school officials and parents said.

"It takes a lot of discipline, six to eight hours of work each day, just like regular school," said Darlene Fuentes, who enrolled her two sons in Branson Online last fall.

One son, David, who is 17, successfully juggled online study and a part-time job, allowing him to make the payments on his pickup truck, said Mrs. Fuentes, a bank teller who lives in Walsenburg, Colo., 65 miles northwest of Branson. But Kevin, who is 14, lacked the discipline to sit at the computer and fell behind, she said.

"Things distract him and the first thing you'd know he was in the kitchen, getting a snack, so it was a battle," Mrs. Fuentes said. She took Kevin out of Branson Online at the end of one semester and enrolled him at the local public high school.

Of the several Colorado districts that have opened online schools, Branson has the second-largest enrollment. The largest is Colorado Virtual Academy, a charter school based in a Denver suburb that is affiliated with K12 Inc., a company based in Virginia. Jeff Kwitowski, a K12 spokesman, said the company managed Virtual Academies in nine states and in Washington, D.C., with a total enrollment of about 15,000, which he said made it the nation's largest operator of online public schools. The Denver Public Schools run an online school in affiliation with another corporate operator, Connections Academy Inc., based in Baltimore.

Some children have adapted to the computerized home study, mustering the self-discipline to advance academically without a classroom teacher to prod them. Others have not.

About one in four of the 1,000 students who had enrolled in Branson Online for the last school year dropped out by February 2004, and after only 5 percent of students took the required standardized tests in 2002, the state put the school on an accreditation watch list.

Of the Branson students who took the state tests last year, state records show, higher percentages scored "unsatisfactory" in math at every grade level tested compared with students at schools statewide. At Branson, 48 percent of eighth graders scored unsatisfactory, for example, compared with 28 percent of eighth graders at schools statewide. Still, Branson authorities are convinced that the school fills a need and will continue to grow.

"In the short term, our enrollment can double or triple," said Ben Doherty, a cattle rancher and the president of Branson's school board.